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ABSTRACT

In everyday conversation, people sometimes laugh as they speak. A study was conducted to determine whether the content of statements occurring with laughter differed systematically from that of statements occurring without laughter. Tape recordings of 20 utterances taken from a conversation among a small group of college students were categorized by 40 adult subjects as (1) boasts, (2) challenges, (3) humorous, (4) emotionally laden, (5) supportive, (6) requests for information, (7) statements of information, and (8) observations about the group. Results indicated that there is no orderly pattern to when speaker laughter will occur. Specifically, utterances containing speaker laughter were most likely to be boasts, challenges, emotionally laden, and humorous. In considering why speaker laughter may accompany these kinds of statements, it should be noted that each category verges on violating conversational norms or boundaries. This leads to the speculation that speaker laughter may serve as a metacommunication signalling submissiveness and mitigating the potentially abrasive content of the utterance. (A transcript of the stimulus utterances is appended.) (FL)

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Regularities in the Content of Statements "Said With A Laugh"

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Accounting for Speaker Laughter: Regularities
in the Content of Utterances "Said with a Laugh"

Numerous studies over the past fifteen years indicate that our everyday speech and movement are subject to much more highly systematic rules than ever we imagined. The dialect or register we employ in conversation is determined by the social setting and the particular social identity participants are trying to project (Blom & Gumperz, 1972), forms of address are regulated by the status and solidarity relations of speakers (Brown & Ford, 1964), and even our accidental interruptions of other speakers have orderly outcomes depending on the sex of conversants (Zimmerman & West, 1975). The current study attempts to extend this work to a new domain of conversational behavior: speaker laughter. Speaker laughter refers to the occasional brief laughs speakers intermingle with their utterances. The question of interest here is why does such laughter occur? Are there regular principles governing its production?

Very little work has been done on speaker laughter. There has been some interesting work on it by conversational analysts, though it is generally unpublished. Sacks (unpublished manuscript), for example, suggests that speaker laughter acts as a framing device for potentially ambiguous comments, encouraging the listener to take the most innocuous interpretation of the reported event. Jefferson, Sacks & Schegloff (unpublished manuscript) found laughter associated with potentially humorous comments. They describe a sequence in which the speaker inserts

a brief laugh into a sentence, observes whether the listener also begins to laugh, and then continues to laugh only if the listener has joined in. In this way speaker laughter serves as a protective device. It cues the listener to the humorous intent of the comment without fully committing the speaker to the socially risky business of laughing at his or her own joke. This view is also consistent with other work demonstrating that people are more likely to laugh at jokes when they are exposed to a laughing other (Brown & Ramos, 1981). In that sense, speaker laughter may serve as a social cueing device in which the speaker provides both the joke and the laughter stimulus.

In applying the Jefferson analysis of speaker laughter to audio tapes of small group conversation, however, this author had some difficulty fitting it to all instances. For example, not all speaker laugh utterances (SLUs) are followed by listeners' laughter, indeed in the sample used for this study only 20% were. While we might suppose that the remaining 80% constitute instances of speakers' failure to trigger listeners' laughter, there is conversational evidence running counter to this. The content of some SLUs seems far from humorous. Indeed, some SLUs sound pained, as if the speakers are touching upon subjects very near their hearts--their dreams, aspirations, fears of personal inadequacy. And the rejoinders to these SLUs were never laughter, but rather they were supportive and even consoling comments. These SLUs, then, had no indications that they were intended humorously, nor were they responded to as such by participants. But if not all instances of speaker laughter are associated with humor, what could account for their

distribution in the conversation? Was there some regular pattern to its occurrence?

Further analysis suggested that the content of SLUs seemed to differ in a regular way from the content of non-SLUs. Specifically, the SLUs seemed to be of four types. Some were of the humorous sort already discussed, a second group was of the emotionally-laden genre alluded to in the preceding paragraph. In addition, some SLUs were boasts about one's accomplishments and skills and others were challenges either to another individual or to the group as a whole. Every instance of an SLU seemed to fall into one of these four content categories: boasts, challenges, emotionally-laden, or humorous. This study tests whether in fact SLUs tend to fall into these four categories, whereas non-SLUs fall into other categories. In order to test the hypothesis, subjects were asked to rate how well each of eight categories described the content of utterances taken from a conversation among twelve Harvard undergraduates enrolled in a small groups course. The categories were the four predicted to occur with SLUs and four additional categories which described much of the general discourse in the group, but which were not thought to co-occur with speaker laughter (supportive, observations about the group, requests for information, and statements of neutral information). In the discussion section, we will suggest that speaker laughter functions as a mitigator and briefly consider the implications of speaker laughter for impression formation.

METHOD

Subjects

Subjects were Harvard University Summer School students and employees who were paid to participate. Forty persons took part, twenty men and twenty women. Subjects were mailed summaries of the results of the study if they provided their name and address. Average age of participants was 20; ages ranged from 16 to 38.

Apparatus

Stimulus materials. A stimulus tape was made containing 20 utterances, 10 with speaker laughter and 10 without. The speech samples were selected from a master tape of students participating in an interactive small group. The sample of speaker laugh utterances was exhaustive, that is, each of the first 10 utterances containing speaker laughter from the beginning of the master tape was used as a stimulus. After each laugh-containing utterance was recorded, the master tape was advanced 50 feet and the next utterance without speaker laughter was recorded. In this way a stimulus tape was formed which alternated utterances containing speaker laughter with utterances without laughter.

All segments were 15 seconds long. The conclusion of each laugh or no-laugh target utterance determined the end point. The recording included the 15 seconds prior to that point, whether or not this occurred at a natural juncture in the conversation. The length of the speech samples was help constant to control for the amount of contextual

information available for each type of utterance. Having a fixed time sample, however, meant that sometimes two speakers occur in one sample. In these cases a note on the rating sheet told subjects to attend to the second speaker. Each selection was recorded twice in succession so that subjects could hear the same passage two times before rating it.

A complete transcript of the speech samples appears in Appendix A.

Rating sheets. Subjects used a rating sheet which allowed them to show, on a scale of 1 to 5, how well they thought each of the eight categories applied to each speech sample. A "1" meant the category "does not apply"; "5" meant the category "very much applies."

Setting. The study was held in a seminar room with from five to ten subjects participating at one time, seated around a circular table. Equipment consisted of a Wollensak tape recorder for playing back the stimulus tape and the rating sheets.

Procedure

Subjects filled out the background information form, including their name and address only if they wanted a summary of the results.

It was explained that the study concerned how we form our impressions of the meaning of others' conversations. Subjects were told they would hear 20 pieces of conversation taken from a tape-recording of students in a course on small group psychology. They were to rate each sample using the rating sheets provided.

Each category on the rating sheets was discussed briefly. The meaning of each number in the ratings was also described. Subjects were

told that they could use any number of categories for each sample. If they felt none of the categories applied, they were to circle all 1's, if all categories were applicable, they were to circle 5's for each category.

Subjects were told that if there were two speakers in a sample, they were to rate the second speaker (since the target utterance occurred in the latter portion of the 15-second segment). In a pilot project, subjects reported that occasionally they thought the nature of a single speaker's comments changed in the middle of a sample. Consequently subjects were instructed that if they felt a change occurred mid-sample, they should rate their impressions of the final section (again because the utterances of interest were always at the end of the segment).

Four practice samples were played. Subjects rated each sample. They were then asked whether they had any questions about procedure or categories. When all questions had been answered, the main portion of the study began. Subjects were given as much time as they needed for each sample. They were instructed to look up when they were finished with the ratings. When everyone looked up, the next sample was played. The entire study took one hour.

Subjects were debriefed after the study. None of them guessed that the variable of interest was speaker laughter. Subjects were allowed to discuss their impressions of the various speakers they had heard on tape. Subjects reported that the task was easy even though they knew so little about the context and participants of the original conversation.

RESULTS

The central hypothesis of this study was that the content of SLUS would be categorized differently than non-SLUs. Specifically, it was predicted that laugh utterances would fall into the first four categories (boastful, challenging, emotionally-laden, and humorous) whereas no-laugh utterances would be of the last four categories (supportive, request for information, neutral information, and observation about the group). This hypothesis predicts the pattern of subjects' ratings shown in Table 1.

Insert Table 1 about here

In analysis of variance terms, the hypothesis predicts an interaction between utterance type and category type.

An analysis of variance was performed. Subjects was crossed with everything. The design used repeated measures. The contrast of interest (Category type x Utterance type) was coded directly into the Anova, rather than computing a contrast on the cell means. "Specific" category is nested within "Category type." That is, the effect of interest was whether the first group of four categories was used to describe laugh-utterances, whereas the second group of four categories was used to describe non-laugh utterances.

The results supported the central hypothesis. There is a significant interaction between utterance type and category type ($F(1,39)=388.72$, $p<0.001$). Table 2 gives the mean scores for each category.

Insert Table 2 about here

A calculation of difference scores for each subject can be made to determine exactly how many subjects showed the expected pattern. Difference scores are calculated by creating a table like that of Table 3 for each subject.

Insert Table 3 about here

Cell one, for example, contains the sum of ratings given by a single subject in all the first four categories summed across the 10 laugh utterances. Values in cells two and three are added and the result subtracted from the sum of cells one and four. The differences varied from +7 to +64, but all differences were positive. The difference test shows, then, that the predicted interaction between utterance type and category type was obtained for every subject.

In sum, the prediction that SLUs would tend to be boasts, challenges, emotionally-laden, or humorous, whereas non-SLUs were not, was confirmed.

DISCUSSION

Results indicate that there is an orderly pattern to when speaker laughter will occur. Specifically, utterances containing speaker

laughter are more likely to be of the following four kinds: boasts, challenges, emotionally-laden, and humorous.

In considering why speaker laughter may accompany these kinds of statements, we note that each of them verges on violating conversational norms or boundaries. Boasts, for example, threaten the prohibition against bragging about one's own skills or abilities. Challenges constitute a verbal attack and are not to be issued in groups where cohesion and comraderie are stressed, features which characterized most of this group's interaction. Emotionally-laden comments about one's feelings or experiences press upon accepted intimacy levels. And humor often involves a content or style of an irreverent nature. Each category, then, appears to violate or push against conversational norms in ways which non-laugh categories do not. This leads us to speculate that the speaker laughter may serve as a meta-communication signalling submissiveness and mitigating the potentially abrasive content of the utterance. This view is consistent with ethologists' findings on the function of smiles among primates (Andrew, 1963). It is also consistent with other lexical and syntactic features of the SLUs. In one SLU, for example, a speaker said "I act--hopefully (huh, huh) and I like to play hockey." The adverb "hopefully", and the shift in form from "I do X" to "I like to do X" are each mitigations of the sort Labov & Fanshel (1977) discuss. It seems plausible, then, that the laughter may serve a similar mitigating function.

Mitigations allow moves made during interaction--whether moves toward greater intimacy or toward confrontation--to be done tentatively. We

would not expect speaker laughter, or other mitigations, to occur in contexts where no attempt is made to soften the impact of words, confrontative labor-management negotiations being one example. Similarly, the precise content of sentences which would constitute a boast, or any of the other forms, varies with context. For a professional actor, the statement that "I act" would not constitute a boast since it would be a demonstrated fact. Among undergraduates, however, it may sound like a claim to greater expertise than is yet warranted. Omitting laughter with such a comment in the student group could make the speaker seem arrogant. There was in fact an example in the study of a challenge which occurred without speaker laughter. Several subjects later mentioned that the speaker sounded unusually hostile or aggressive. Inclusion or exclusion of mitigators such as speaker laughter, then, may shape our impressions of others' character or intentions much as individuals' observance or violation of norms regarding social space do (Hall, 1966). In that sense, emotionally-laden utterances without laughter may make the speaker seem overly personal or intense. Humorous comments without speaker laughter may create the impression that the speaker has a dry sense of humor or perhaps engender confusion as to whether the comments were meant jokingly, as the Sacks and Jefferson analyses suggest.

In sum, it appears that speaker laughter has a regular distribution in conversation, tending to co-occur with utterances of particular kinds. This suggests that, with further work, speaker laughter might be used as an unobtrusive measure of intimacy levels within a group--as a

function both of the frequency of speaker laughter and the kinds of utterances with which it co-occurs. It might also be examined in the study of individual differences. It may be that more socially skilled individuals use speaker laughter to mitigate their challenges, for example, whereas the less skilled do not. Perhaps this is another of the conversational techniques which Jones, Hobbs and Hockenbury (1982) have demonstrated mediate the smoothness of social interaction and in turn affect loneliness or social integration of individuals. Speaker laughter may, then, constitute a conversational variable of interest and use to social psychologists studying both group and individual level phenomena.

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TABLE 1

Predicted Relationships Between
Category Type and Utterance Type

UTTERANCE TYPE	CATEGORY TYPE: First four	CATEGORY TYPE: Last four
Laugh	High	Low
No laugh	Low	High

TABLE 2
Mean Category Usage for Each Kind of Utterance

Categories	Kind of Utterance	
	Laugh	No Laugh
Boast	1.78	1.33
Challenge	1.58	1.87
Emotionally-laden	2.84	2.25
Humorous	2.29	1.08
Supportive	1.37	2.13
Request for Information	1.24	2.23
Observation About Group	1.58	2.01
Neutral Information	1.86	1.84

This table shows the rating averaged across all forty subjects.

TABLE 3

Table for Use in Calculating Difference Scores

		CATEGORY TYPE	
		First four	Last four
UTTERANCE TYPE	Laugh	1	2
	No laugh	3	4

APPENDIX A

Transcript of Stimulus Utterances

(1) Um--I sing, I'm in the Glee Club, I act--hopefully (huh-huh)--and I like to play hockey.

(2) First speaker: Cause I find myself running around doing a lot of things but not really getting into 'em -- which is ...(pause)

Second speaker: Well -- test the water before you jump in.

(3) A self -- a self image of -- um -- that people have of themselves that I find kind of unpleasant, sometimes. [pause] And I find it very hard to put into words (heh).

(4) It -- did -- I'm interested did -- did both of you -- the fact that you're here, is that partly to do with the fact that you're in a very questioning thing?

(5) [3-second silence] Sometimes I get the feeling the general consensus is no one likes Harvard (heh-heh).

(6) Well I suppose for myself it's un -- not only a feeling of trying to get a better idea of myself but also -- uhm -- I guess that's the main reason -- but also for the fact that I didn't find any really interesting courses other than this.

(7) First speaker: -- feeling that I'm taking advantage of it like I should.

Second speaker: I remember like last year there were so many things going on I didn't have time for anything -- or not anything but you know a lot of things (heh-heh)...

(8) A lot of change is hard to see in perspective until after it's happened too which is why you can't pin everything down on the spot ... you know what I mean?

(9) You know -- the path -- my -- you know through the next fifty years was just as straight as an arrow -- uh -- Medical School, I had it all-you know I could sit down and write you know the time -- the year of marriage, death (heh-heh-heh)...

(10) First speaker: I feel -- right now I feel better physically and emotionally than I have -- I felt all of last year and all during high school even though I'm -- supposedly I shouldn't because I'm up in the air -- I don't really know what I'm gonna do.

Second speaker: There's no should or shouldn't -- I mean you know.

(11) So I'm still sort of -- sort of in a -- in a never-never land and looking for something -- some kind of a problem that you know really -- I can focus my attention on. And I realized I was just in pre-Med for just all the wrong reasons and so now I'm right up in the air (uh-huh-huh).

(12) I am a biochemistry major and I am also in the Glee Club. I hadn't noticed that you were before.

(13) So I -- I'm sort of being pulled in all kinds of different directions -- I don't know exactly you know everything seems -- it's not a lack of not finding an interesting thing to do -- it's just which one (eh-heh) which one will be the most fulfilling.

(14) I don't know -- either to -- become more comfortable talking in groups ... or just ... understand why it is that I don't say a whole lot ... and be comfortable with that.

(15) When I told my mother I was going to be a doctor she said -- she said "Are you sure (huh-huh-huh) you want to be a doctor? I mean knowing you, are you sure you have the personal qualities that would make a good doctor?" and I've had to think about it.

(16) First speaker: Any questions? [2-second pause]

Second speaker: Yeah -- did you take Chem 20 'cause you were pre-Med or not? [others in group laugh] I -- do you take Chem 20 only because you do that? I mean does one take Chem 20 only because one does that?

(17) There might be handouts at the back of the room and he'll flash it on the board "Handouts at the back of the room" and all of a sudden there's a mass exodus of humanity toward those handouts and you're fighting -- you're literally fighting people for the last handout. People take three or four (heh-heh) you know "I might lose one..."

(18) Is it easier to talk about yourself when people ask you questions or just off-the-cuff? I don't know, 'cause I haven't decided which is easier for me.

(19) First speaker: I donno it's just really -- I didn't really like the atmosphere.

Second speaker: There's gotta be better things to talk about than Chem 20 (huh-huh) -- it's gettin too depressin.

(20) But I feel like this is uh -- this is interesting because uh -- I feel in a sense that -- like I'm in a dining hall you know where you have these kinds of conversations, but you have them with people you know -- so you don't have to present yourself.